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Essay
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SIR BASIL H. LIDDELL HART
AND THE GULF WAR

by

Anna Natsis

*I submit that it is only by
trial and error, by insistent
scrutiny and by readiness to
re-examine presently accredited
conclusions that we have risen,
so far as we have risen, from
our brutish ancestors; and I
believe that in our loyalty to
these habits lies our only
chance not merely of progress
but even of survival.*

Judge Learned Hand

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INTRODUCTION

Military theorists and writers going back to Sun Tzu have much in common with management theorists of the present century. Both review and relate history, record their observations, make adjustments for social, political and technological changes that have occurred, and thereafter codify the old and make it the "new". In some cases, they also write from experience, particularly the management theorists. In essence, they do not really come up with much that is radically new, but rather they adapt older theories to their current environment. This is not to say that new ideas aren't developed and proposed, but in many cases, what we see is a "re-packaging" of the basic body of knowledge and ideas from the past, with perhaps some new labels and varying degrees of emphasis, depending on the situation. Whether concerned with the management of war or management in the corporate world, the basics of leadership, dealing with the human element, is common to both fields of activity.

In the area of military studies, "weapons, and tactics change, men geography and strategy do not."¹ Even in war, one of the greatest challenges involves an understanding of the human element on both sides of the conflict. It is interesting to note how much the often diverse and sometimes antagonistic military theorists studied in this course actually agree on certain

¹ Attributed to John Glubb (Pasha) in lecture of 1969 by Professor H.P. Willmott in course of seminar of 4 November 1992.

principles. For example, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Jomini, Hart and Mao Tse-tung all stress the primacy of moral factors in describing the determinants of war - the importance of breaking the enemy will to resist as a means to victory.

Because of the commonalities noted above, writing an essay on the 1991 Gulf War presents some problems with respect to selecting an individual's theories as the basis of analysis. Additionally, the recency of the War makes it difficult to make an accurate assessment of the events. Although the Clausewitzian perspective of war is evident throughout the conflict, the contradictions of an unfinished work make it difficult to resolve in such a short essay. Instead, this author will concentrate on some of the contributions of Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart and his Indirect Approach, since many of Hart's theories appear to have influenced the U.S. and coalition statesmen and military leaders. It is important to stress that Hart, like all the other military writers, was a product of his time, and was reacting to his own personal observations of the horrors of WWI trench warfare on the western front.

THE INDIRECT APPROACH

Hart drew distinctions between policy and strategy, stressing that policy was the business of the government, and strategy was the military means to implement that policy. He also referred to

this overarching policy as "grand strategy,"² including economic and diplomatic pressure as well as military force in his definition. He believed that nations do not wage war for war's sake, but only to achieve their stated policies. The role of grand strategy is to coordinate and harness all of the nation's resources to achieve the political objective. In this regard, he agreed with Clausewitz who said that war was an "instrument of policy."³ If military action is called for, however, Hart believed that one of the key goals of this grand strategy is to look beyond the conflict to the "subsequent peace".⁴ What conditions will exist at the end of the conflict or battle? If the grand strategy and policy determine that a military action is required, then theoretically, the military strategy is developed to meet these political and national objectives.

The U.S., quickly reacting to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, built on its previous global and regional goals (e.g. balance of power and the Carter Doctrine) to establish four U.S. national policy objectives. These policy objectives became the foundation for subsequent military objectives and strategy. During Desert Shield, the military took a defensive position to deter and defend, but the coalition failed to convince the Iraqis to

² B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy (New York: Meridian, 1991) 321.

³ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1989) 88.

⁴ Hart 322.

withdraw. Since Liddell Hart believed that the object of war isn't always the physical destruction of the opponent's army, chances are that he would have approved of the preliminary U.S./coalition actions. Of the four political objectives set down by President Bush, the third one - "security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf" corresponds to Hart's concern about defining the state of affairs after the conflict.

Hart's Indirect Approach was a reaction to the senseless slaughter of mass armies that he witnessed in WWI. He believed that there were options to the direct approach of concentrating mass armies where the enemy expects them to be, and can resist them. Hart advocated subduing the enemy's will to resist and restoring peace as quickly as possible with the least human and economic costs. He never ruled out decisive battles, but talked of quick, limited victories, pitting mass against the enemy's weaknesses (as did Hart's antithesis, Clausewitz).

U.S. military planners successfully developed military objectives and forces to meet the political objectives. Four clear (but not necessarily feasible) military objectives were laid out. These then led to a concise mission statement, and theater military objectives. All these objectives dovetailed and could be traced upward to the national policy objectives. In essence, they were limited objectives for a limited war (or more accurately, in this case, a battle). The U.S. planners agreed to use decisive force

to achieve goals quickly with minimum casualties, as opposed to attrition warfare. They stressed maximum speed and strength against weakness - using overwhelming force to produce a quick end to Iraq's warfighting capability. While some would say that Hart advocated a "cheap" war, there is no refuting the U.S. desire to avoid a long drawn out war. The public demanded this as did the military leaders.

Hart's method stressed psychological and moral (will) factors as well as the physical (as did Sun Tzu, Jomini and Clausewitz). His Indirect Approach advocated disruption, dislocation and deception (as did Sun Tzu). Using the principle of maneuver (Jomini) and surprise, the enemy's equilibrium could be upset both physically and psychologically. Hart also believed that having alternative objectives to mentally confuse and force dispersion of enemy forces provided greater flexibility. To cause the enemy to disperse his forces sometimes meant dispersion of one's own, which would then re-group and concentrate again. Dispersion and concentration sometimes were a circular activity. Other objectives were to endanger supplies, to cut lines of retreat and communications in order to cause disruption.

In the Persian Gulf, these principles were successfully applied. Saddam Hussein expected frontal assaults against Iraqi defenses. The coalition practiced effective deception to keep the Iraqis off balance and disoriented with regard to its actual strength,

location and intentions. While we most likely did not deceive Saddam with our capabilities, he really did not know our intentions. Amphibious rehearsals, artillery concentrations and repeated air activity all supported the goal of pinning the Iraqis down in Kuwait to prevent their moving west to meet the main attack. With maneuver, and with some of the fastest movement of armored forces ever seen on any battlefield, the U.S. achieved the desired strategic and tactical surprise and subsequent defeat, quickly and with relatively few casualties. Air power had sapped the will and strength of the Iraqi troops as well as destroyed their command and control capabilities.

CONCLUSION

This brief assessment of some of Liddell Hart's theories shows some strong correlation with the strategies pursued in the Persian Gulf. The point is, however, that any one of four or five other military theorists could have just as easily found their ideas reflected in the conduct of this battle. What differentiates each of these is the degree to which they emphasize their "principles". They all reflect their times and their experiences. Certainly, if Clausewitz knew of the possibilities of increased mobility and advanced weaponry, his thoughts on mass against mass may have been rewritten. Hart did not really differ that much from Clausewitz - he even said that Clausewitz's disciples had carried his thoughts to an extreme

that was never intended. Clausewitz himself said that he was worried about being misinterpreted before he had time to edit his massive volume. Hart never ruled out destruction of the enemy's army, but felt that the enemy's will to fight was a better target. His ideal goal was to win without fighting. Would Clausewitz have disagreed with that since he said, "We can now see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat."⁵ Wouldn't Clausewitz have agreed with Hart's belief that the object of war is to obtain a better peace? Hart wasn't so much interested in seeking battle, but rather getting into a position (by indirect methods) of sufficient strength to insure that the follow-on battle would lead to victory. The Gulf War coalition was given time to build enough strength to produce a decision with relatively little fighting.

To judge a military theorist in isolation through the conduct of one conflict can be risky. In another decade historians will dissect U.S. and coalition actions under a new light and with more information. Did the battlefield victories lead to political victories? Were all the objectives achieved? Did we really get into Saddam's mind, or are we still dealing with the human side of the problem - why did he do, or not do, what he did? For now, History is still the best teacher since we cannot feasibly "practice" wars. We need to continue to study the past

⁵ Clausewitz 94.

and try to learn from others. The principles of annihilation, attrition, disruption, offense, defense, direct and indirect methods have been around for centuries. The true role of strategy needs to be re-defined for each situation. Most likely we will find that "there is nothing new under the sun", but rather differing shades of emphasis.

In the end, each and every military theorist has contributed in some way to the successes of the Persian Gulf War. Just as the management theorists continue to refine and recast new ways to manage and lead people, so too the military theorists will continue to review history, critique successes and failures, and propose strategies for future wars and battles based on changes to weaponry and tactics. Both will, however, always be faced with the realities of the unchanging nature of man, and the need to understand this impact upon any "new" theory.